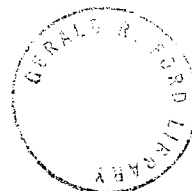


REPORT ON "THE TRIBUNE SPEAKOUT"

UNITED NATIONS
WORLD CONFERENCE OF THE
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S YEAR

MEXICO CITY, JUNE 19-JULY 2, 1975



Modeled on a similar type of forum at the 1974 World Population Conference, an International Committee of the Conference of Non-governmental Organizations in Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council organized a non-governmental Tribune to run concurrently with the inter-governmental World Conference of IWY at Mexico City, June 19-July 2, 1975.

Open to the participation of all interested people, the Tribune's agenda centered on the IWY themes of equality, development and peace and the multiplicity of issues involved in these themes.

A formal, structured program was scheduled daily through June 27, consisting of morning and afternoon panel discussions covering a wide range of subjects. "Women Across Cultures", "Attitude Formation and Socialization Processes", "Law and the Status of Women", "Population and Planned Parenthood", "Peace and Disarmament", were among the subjects scheduled for Conference Rooms One and Two which could seat up to 3000 and 1000 persons. No formal sessions were scheduled for discussions on the World Plan of Action.

Daily briefings on the proceedings of the inter-governmental conference were scheduled each morning. In addition, smaller rooms at the Tribune site were allocated daily for ad hoc meetings at the request of individuals and groups on a first request, first scheduled basis.

The subjects discussed at these ad hoc meetings were varied as the interests of the 5,000 Tribune participants. On a given day, for example, meeting rooms were allocated for discussions on

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"Feminist Health Centers", "Cross Cultural Consideration on Replacing Male Dominant Language Elements", "The Chicano Struggle for Justice", "The National Gay Task Force Report", "Women and the Church", "Education in the USSR", and "The Right to Abortion". Attendance at the Sessions varied from 30-40 to standing room only.

The organizers of the Tribune stressed that the Tribune itself had no political position and would not issue any statement of principles. Individuals and groups could make statements, but not in the Tribune's name.

From the beginning it became increasingly evident that the structure of the Tribune as well as the distance between the official conference and the Tribune, a distance both of geography as well as of spirit, did not allow for any direct input of the Tribune participants into the deliberations of the Conference delegates. The frustrations arising from this lack of communication as well as the failure of the Tribune to provide opportunity for discussion of the World Plan of Action led to the formation of "speakout" sessions open to all Tribune members who wished to discuss the contents and implementation of the World Plan of Action.

A core of activists, sparked by American women but representing such diverse countries as Nigeria, Australia, Japan, Argentina, India, Bermuda, Mexico and Sri Lanka, formed a steering committee to consider necessary revisions to the World Plan of Action, the centerpiece of discussion and activity in Committee One of the official Conference. The first "speakout" session got off to a shaky start on Monday, June 23. In fact, it almost didn't come off at all as rooms had been allocated on the previous Saturday. Negotiations with the Tribune management resulted in borrowing a room allocated to the United Nations Association from 1:30-3:30 p.m., the time Senator Charles Percy was chairing a panel on Women and Development at the Tribune. A telling point in the negotiations for the room was the argument that the speakout might help to divert from

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Senator Percy's panel confrontation of the type that marked a meeting of American non-governmental organizations with the American delegation at the American Embassy on the previous Saturday morning.

The presentation of ground rules for the speak-out drawn up by the steering committee set off the first outcry from a small group of dissidents similar to that which had loudly confronted the American delegation at the Saturday Embassy meeting. Ms. Betty Friedan speaking for the steering committee urged that participants stick to concrete issues of concern to women of all countries rather than airing the "internal dirty linen" of their own countries. Regretably, for the next hour and a half constructive group discussion was periodically interrupted by a series of orchestrated harangues by Americans on "American Imperialism", freedom from U.S. oppression in Puerto Rico and Panama, assertions of the unrepresentative nature of the American delegation, etc.

Undaunted by the discouraging setback of its first session, the steering committee met throughout Monday night. It appointed chairmen for 9 open and representative task forces to draft revisions and additions to the specific areas of the World Plan of Action. The task forces which had participation from all continents met throughout Tuesday and well into Tuesday night to consider the World Plan of Action item by item.

In a truly extraordinary session on Wednesday from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. the suggested changes were presented in Conference Room One to over 2000 persons. The meeting was firmly and fairly chaired in succession by women from the nine countries. The chairman of each task force presented recommended revisions and amendments to the various substantive sections of the Plan. Floor comment and questions were stringently kept to the subject at hand by the chairpersons. In short of two hours the suggested changes to the WPA were discussed and approved by the 2000 participants.

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Calling themselves the Voice of the United Women of the Tribune, a committee called on Ms. Helvi Sipila, Secretary General of the UN IWY Conference, Thursday morning to present her with copies of the revisions including those representing the views of the Latin American feminist coalition and to request 10 minutes of Plenary time to present the revisions to the official delegates. Ms. Sipila agreed to take the request in hand and accepted an invitation to respond to the Friday lunch time speakout session.

Clearly, the course of the speakout was never destined to run smoothly. A noisy and increasingly ominous demonstration, much publicized by the world media, marred the opening of the Friday session. As the over 3000 women awaited the arrival of Ms. Sipila, a group of some 50 Spanish-speaking women of different nationalities insisted that they had not seen one of the copies, which were unfortunately limited in number, of the original revisions. They loudly protested that they could not accept the revisions. Unfortunately, their clamor drowned out an announcement that the U.S. Embassy was at that very moment printing 5000 copies in English and Spanish of the edited revisions for distribution at the Tribune, and at the Inter-Governmental Conference, so that delegates could take home with them a record of their achievement.

Appended to this printed copy of the revisions and amendments was a summary of the positions taken by a coalition of Latin American women representing all Central and South American countries present at the Tribune.

The intervention of a well-known Mexican feminist leader who called for calmness and reason to prevail finally quieted the demonstration in time for Ms. Sipila's arrival. A press conference devoted to explaining the revisions to the media, which immediately followed her speech, had to be cancelled due to a renewed disturbance by this same small group of women.

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In her prepared speech, Ms. Sipila acknowledged the achievement and contributions of the speakout while at the same time firmly explaining that the conference management committee could not set a precedent by granting floor time to a group not accredited to the Conference. She urged the Tribune participants to press their national governments for adoption of the World Plan of Action she predicted would emerge from the World Conference. She enjoined her audience to carry their unification beyond the Mexico City experience to create a network of women for future implementation of the World Plan.

The publicized dissension on the part of a small group of women in no way should be allowed to obscure the singular achievement of this large group of women who - "put it all together" in such a business-like manner, in the short space of a week and against innumerable odds. This achievement stands as an example of unity of purpose and a triumph of cooperation involving as it did women of such distinct and varying backgrounds, talents, aspirations, and temperments.

That a group of dedicated women working around the clock could overcome substantial political and national differences to agree on a blueprint for the improvement of the lives of women throughout the world is a testimonial to the concept of self-help and to the vitality and determination of these women to make their experience at the Tribune significant for all women.

The last three days of the Tribune had been left unscheduled to be filled by programs responding to the on-the-spot wishes of the delegates. A variety of panels, seminars and ad hoc discussions, including a standing-room only appearance of Congresswoman Bella Abzug speaking on "Women Power in the Future" rounded out the Tribune sessions.

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In retrospect it might be noted that the three official American appearances at the Tribune, namely the Senator Percy panel, the American delegation briefing, and Congresswoman Abzug's speech and press conference were unmarked by any hostility or demonstrations. The orchestrated dissension which featured so largely in the media coverage of the Tribune was reserved for the speakout sessions and appeared to be deliberately directed towards disrupting the efforts of those who were succeeding in pulling the Tribune together in such a unified, constructive, and inspiring fashion.

This report was drafted by Maxine Hitchcock at the request of the International Women's Year Secretariat for distribution to the July 1975 meeting of the National Commission on Observance of International Women's Year. 7/18/75

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